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ABSTRACT

A study examined the employment status of elementary, early childhood, and special education graduates from Chadron State College (Nebraska) for the academic years of 1996/97-2000/01 at 2 and 5 years after graduation. Surveys of 282 education graduates, most of whom were teaching in small towns and rural communities of their midwestern states of origin, found that 92 percent were employed as teachers for the first 2 years after graduation, declining to 77 percent after 5 years. This study did not show the level of teacher attrition found in other studies because these graduates come from small towns and rural areas similar to the ones where they are employed. Although teacher salaries in Nebraska are low, additional benefits include health insurance, safety within small schools, and importance of the profession in the community. Another factor in employment and retention of these teachers was the dual certifications that Chadron offers. Dually certified teachers can be particularly useful in rural areas where the availability of support personnel is limited. An advantage to dual certification of elementary education with emphasis in early childhood is that other agencies for early childhood education such as Head Start and preschools are hiring more personnel with college degrees and certification in child development. Special education graduates in K-12 have the opportunity to shift between a general education position and a special education position. (TD)

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# RURAL STUDENTS BECOMING RURAL TEACHERS: HOW LONG DO THEY STAY?

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**Abstract:**
A study of 310 former education graduates of Chadron State College in Elementary, Early Childhood and Special Education revealed high statistics of employment and retention in the teaching field. When students from rural areas of the midwestern states are employed in small towns and rural areas similar to their upbringing, they have better employment and retention percentages as compared to national surveys of all teachers and surveys of teachers in urban settings.

## Introduction

Teacher shortage has been defined in the United States in two ways. First, most states have shortages in specific disciplines of teaching such as special education, math and science, whereas the second type of shortage is created by attrition of the newly hired teachers leaving the profession. As is cited by researchers (Harris & Associates, 1992), nationally approximately 25% of beginning teachers do not teach more than 2 years and 40 - 50% leave the teaching profession within the first 5 years of teaching. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), one-third of newly hired teachers in public schools and one-fifth in private schools started right after graduating from college. Unfortunately, "... many graduates who teach soon after college do not expect to spend much time teaching, let alone make it a career"(NCES – 2000, p.152). High rates of teacher turnover can be attributed to many factors, but shortages persist and threaten school improvement and student performance (Ingersoll, 2001).

As cited in a Midwest states study, (Theobald & Michael, 2001) the results of approximately 12,000 teachers over a five year period showed a dramatic loss of personnel: 50% of beginning teachers, 23% who moved to another district, but 28% who left teaching all together. Results of this study from the Midwestern states (IL, IN, MN, WI) indicated minority teachers were less likely to leave, gender did not show a significant difference in the statistics of leavers, teachers with graduate degrees had lower turnovers, and the age of entry to be a teacher (over thirty) influenced retention in the field. Separating the data for urban vs. other teachers, urban teachers, regardless of their gender, race, age, or degree status, are significantly more likely to move out of their district. Both groups showed high leaving rates for special educators, math and science teachers. Math and science teachers left the profession to receive higher salaries from outside the teaching profession whereas special educators, like minority teachers, moved within the district or state and were less likely to leave teaching.

Nebraska Department of Education reported in 2000 that 1533 new teachers in Nebraska graduating from teacher preparation programs were certified with a very high percentage teaching in their content area of math, social sciences, English and natural sciences. Additionally, the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium reported that the attrition rate was especially high for those in special education; nearly 50% leave within three years. Some special educators moved to other schools within the large city, but the majority left education. Similar shortages were surveyed by the American Association for Employment in Education (1999) and indicated there were considerable shortages in all areas of special education, with balanced needs in elementary and early childhood positions.

## Purpose of this Study

The objectives of this project were:

1. to find the names and teaching employment of education graduates from Chadron State College for the academic years of 1996/97 - 2000/01
2. to report the data of two years and five years of employment since graduation from the teacher preparation programs of elementary, early childhood and special education, and
3. to use the data for evaluation of preservice programs at Chadron State College and implications for other rural four year institutions of higher education.

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*Description of Chadron State College (CSC), the students, and the education programs*

Chadron State College was established in the northwest corner of Nebraska in 1911 as a normal school and evolved into a liberal arts college while retaining an emphasis in the education of future teachers. More than 45% of the approximately 2,500 student population are students going into a career in teaching. Many of the students are described as lower ability because of open enrollment and from less academically–rich backgrounds, being from small towns of Nebraska, Wyoming, and South Dakota. Seven out of ten entering CSC students were first-generation college students (Murphy,1996). Another study looking at education graduates from both elementary and secondary education for 1996-1998, reported197 graduates currently teaching with over 75% coming from small towns in rural Nebraska, Wyoming, South Dakota and Colorado and who returned for their first year of employment in similar size communities, less than 10,000 population (Hytrek, 2000).

**Elementary Education**

Students seeking an Elementary Education Field Endorsement at Chadron State College complete the elementary endorsement in addition to the general studies for all students, the professional education and supporting courses for certification K-8.

Directed observations and field experiences are built into the program at each level. Introduction to Teaching is usually taken the first year of college and has a 10-hour observation component. Educational Psychology is a second year level course and has 15 hours of directed observation. Both times in area schools are frequently done in small towns and rural schools. The third year includes a 100 hour field experience of active observation and participation in either two or three different school settings with teaching activities in small communities and/or rural (one or two-teacher) schools.

The fourth year consists of a professional semester, known as the "block" semester of courses along with student teaching. The block experience consists of eight classes put together in an all-day format. Students stay together for the entire day and are taught in the same room by three instructors. Classes taught include assessment, reading methods, science methods, classroom management, human relations, and curriculum and counseling.

Field experiences also happen during this semester. Every fall, the students go to the Agate Fossil Bed Monument and teach writing lessons to children from rural schools in a multi-county area. Rural school children also come to the CSC for science lessons prepared by the college students as well as Block students traveling to local area schools and other regional schools for teaching science lessons directly in the schools.

Student Teaching is set up the last semester before graduation with a list of three schools of choice. Efforts are made to honor their choices. Some students desire to stay within the driving distance of Chadron, NE, where two elementary schools and rural K-8 schools can accommodate a few students. The rest must choose rural towns in the area of 3,000 persons or less or be placed in small towns from 10,000 – 75,000 persons. The supervision of student teaching for CSC extends into South Dakota, Wyoming and Northern Colorado as well as 1/3 of Western Nebraska.

With Elementary Education, a minor or second endorsement is required from the following: Art, Music, Computer Education, Physical Education, Early Childhood, Science, Educational Media, Social Science, English, Special Education, and/or Mathematics.

**Early Childhood Education**

Early Childhood Education is offered as a subject endorsement of 33 credit hours and as a minor of 27 credit hours in conjunction with the Elementary Education certification at CSC. Each of the courses taught through the Family and Consumer Sciences department offers students the opportunity to build upon their knowledge base of the developmental process and support the idea that learning evolves over time as a result of this knowledge and experience from the environment.

Course offerings give students first hand knowledge of working with families, service learning projects, and an on-site nationally accredited, natural and inclusive early childhood laboratory as they put into practice knowledge base content while working with young children and their families. The community offers partnerships with other child care providers, health professionals, Head Start, Early Head Start, and community based programs that support field experiences and promote best practices.

Each semester, students are involved in a field trip to surrounding communities to view early childhood curriculum and different environments. Field trips have been taken to Rapid City, and Hot Springs, Pine Ridge, SD and to Alliance, and Scottsbluff, and Chadron, NE.



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Preparation of students for working in small, rural communities seems easy since the majority of students enrolling in higher education at Chadron State come from small, rural communities. They also receive a great deal of their early experiences working with children in mall, rural communities.

Practical application and realistic views of small, rural towns are presented on a regular basis as well as the view of larger community structures. A professional attitude towards best practices and a high standard for quality promotes the idea that "children deserve the best". Other values of empowerment of families, active involvement of communities, teaming with others, and the understanding of cultures and diversity of populations of small rural communities are emphasized to promote the type of change and networking necessary to resolve issues of education and child care within communities.

**Special Education**

In 1995, the college switched from a K-9 certification in special education to a K-12 to be completed along with an elementary education certification of K-8. Dual certification of elementary and special education certifications is over 80 credit hours and graduates are trained to teach either general or special education. In addition, a special education minor of 24 credit hours or a preschool disabilities minor of 32 credit hours was selected with elementary education. Since 1997, the special education options have been extended to a secondary education certification 7-12 with a field endorsement in special education uncoupled from elementary education.

All special education options have methods of instruction and accommodations, program management, behavior, assessment, consultation/collaboration, language and adaptive P.E. as the foundation of core competencies. Along with changes in Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act, coursework covers new issues of early childhood services, changes in identification and programming, transitional needs, and new communication skills for inclusion and collaboration of children with disabilities and their families. With early observation and participation in classes and schools, all students are required to complete a special methods class, 100 contact hours in the field of special education along with professional block classes, and student teaching in two placements. The number of credit hours has remained the same in the endorsement, however the amount of information has increased for knowledge base and competencies.

The college has provided many workshops and trainings in assessment, eligibility, assistive technology, sign language, and specific services for early childhood. Evaluations of the special education skills and competencies is based on standards from the Council for Exceptional Children and have been infused into curriculum for courses, special topics for conferences, and workshop trainings in coordination with local school districts. Grant funding from the State Department in conjunction with an Early Childhood Conference offered each spring at CSC, presents teachers and early childhood practitioners new information or changes of IDEA, inclusion of students with disabilities, and the accommodations for low incidence disabilities and behavioral disorders.

Method of data collection

The total numbers of education graduates 1996-2001 in elementary, early childhood and special education were reported from the Registrar office at CSC. Some graduates from 1996-97 and 2000-01 were already identified from the director of field placements and the placement office of CSC. Other graduates not reporting back to the college for employment were contacted by follow up with their parents or by directories of teachers in Nebraska and nearby states. The remaining list of education graduates were contacted by phone to identify where they were employed and whether they were still teaching. If they were not teaching, the reason for not working was listed if mentioned by the graduates or their families.

Surprisingly, the college supervisors know personally where most graduates are located even after marriage or moving from the area by correspondence or connections with area schools when current student teachers are placed from Chadron State College. There are some students who have left the state and thus were not able to be contacted for their present employment or status.

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## Results

### Demographics 1996-2001

| All CSC students | Education Graduates | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 43.9% male | Elem | 18% male | 82% female |
| 56.1% female | EC | 0% male | 100% female |
| | SPED | 9% male | 91% female |
| 4% minority | | 3%minority | |

CSC Graduates in Elementary, Early Childhood, Special Education

| *Years* | *Total* | *Contacted* | *Empl 2 yrs* | *Empl - 5 yrs* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1996-97 | 58 | 49 | 45 | 39 |
| 1997-98 | 51 | 45 | 43 | 33 |
| 1998-99 | 61 | 58 | 52 | |
| 1999-00 | 83 | 79 | 72 | |
| 2000-01 | 57 | 51 | 44 | |
| total | 310 | 282 | 260 - 92.2% | 72 – 76.6% |

By Endorsement

Elementary Education

| Years | Total | Contacted | Empl 2 yrs | Empl of 5 yrs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1996-2001 | 165 | 144 | 87.5% | 84.6% |

Early Childhood Education

| Years | Total | Contacted | Empl 2 yrs | Empl of 5 yrs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1996-2001 | 55 | 49 | 93.9% | 85.7% |

Special Education

| Years | Total | Contacted | Empl 2 yrs | Empl of 5 yrs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1996-2001 | 90 | 89 | 94.4% | 90.1% |

Special Education as an added endorsement or change of endorsement

| Years | Total | Contacted | Still Employed |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1996-2001 | 59 | 48 | 98% |

**Summary**

Results for CSC elementary, early childhood and special education graduates showed very high percentage rates of employment and continued employment for the first two years with less employed in teaching for five years in the profession. We know these graduates are filling teaching positions in small towns and rural communities of their midwestern states of origin. We also know that CSC graduates are certified to teach in Nebraska and surrounding states with little complication of transferring certification. Mobility of the graduates caused delay to some graduates who did not start teaching until they had subbed for the system and were then hired fer the following year. Other graduates who did not pursue teaching after graduation usually were employed in a different profession altogether.

The students with a special education minor or endorsement are easily employed since some states only require the 24 credit hours of a minor for teaching or can be provisionally certified in Nebraska with 20 credit hours. Special Education graduates K-12 have the opportunity to change from a general education position to a special education position or vice versa. Perhaps this dual certification has served the CSC students well in its preparation and leverage in obtaining positions.

***As the need has arisen for certified personnel in early childhood special education positions, Early and Head Start programs, preschools, and day and childcare settings, the college has graduates who are able to find employment in these related programs.***



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**Implications**

The majority of studies concerning teacher employment and retention actually concentrate on the numbers of individuals who leave. The follow up surveys of these people try to analyze reasons for leaving with implementation of economic, educational, or mentoring type strategies to help retain teachers and make implications for change within the school district or state of teaching certification. This study does not show the type of attrition of teachers two and five years from graduation that other studies have indicated. What makes the difference?

The Chadron State College student population in education indicates these are rural students, mostly Caucasian and mostly female. In rural Nebraska similar to other surrounding states the statistics for employed married females is over 70%. Average teacher salaries in Nebraska are low, but often times, the benefits are worth the low-paid contract in terms of health insurance, safety within small schools, importance of the profession in the community, and employment even if it involves traveling.

Another factor in employment and retention of teachers is the dual certification of Elementary education with an additional field endorsement. We have questioned whether dual certification is a good option to advise and offer students at CSC. Special education is a viable backup for employment and know that rural schools are trying to obtain teachers who have both trainings for their students. Dually certified teachers can be particularly useful in rural areas where the availability of support personnel is less than in urban school districts. Even schools that are served by cooperatives and educational service units have special personnel who are itinerant to several schools with great distance between them.

Another advantage to dual certification of Elementary education with emphasis in early childhood became popular when local school districts began hiring teachers in the primary level with specific training in early childhood. Soon after that, other agencies for early childhood education such as Head Start and preschools were hiring more personnel with college degrees and certification in child development.

Chadron State College in 2002 began a new education certification from the State of Nebraska called Early Childhood Unified. This certifies teachers birth through grade three to teach and work with students and families with or without disabilities. This new certification is with dual background coursework in Early Childhood and Special Education. Early childhood service providers are being asked to work with more inclusive groups of students requiring knowledge of disabilities and it impact on child development.

Close connections to the College for training and graduate programs continue the interaction between college supervisors to their former students, now teachers, for evaluative information to upgrade the preservice programs and emphasis of the types of skills needed in the teaching field. The former graduates have a vital role in shaping the future skills of teaching and teachers. Perhaps a final implication supports the attitude of satisfaction felt among teachers who work and live in small, rural communities. This attitude of teachers is based on making a difference as they touch the lives of children and seeing changes occur within all aspects of the learning process as a positive contribution of educational leadership.

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*Helping Rural Special Education Preservice Teachers Survive the Virtual Wilderness.* Ronda Menlove and Darcie Peterson, Utah State University





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